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Bombs, Bullets and the Border:

Policing Ireland's Frontier: Irish Security Policy, 1969-1978.

Patrick Mulroe

Newbridge, Co. Kildare: Irish Academic Press, 2017, 296 pp.

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In an effort to reassure residents in Northern Ireland about the potential impact of Brexit following the result of the June 2016 referendum, Prime Minister May asserted that there would be 'no return to the borders of the past'.ⁱ In so doing, she inadvertently evoked the kind of militarised images that we had all assumed would never – but *never* – have a place on this island again. Interestingly enough (as research I recently conducted for the *Bordering on Brexit* project revealed, see this Issue), memories of watchtowers, armed soldiers, blown-up bridges and 'dragons' teeth' road blocks are all too easily provoked by the mere mention of 'border controls'. This is especially the case for those living closest to it.

The fact that a border is not a barrier but a point of connection, where experience on one side has ramifications for those on the other, becomes most apparent in dramatic times. The period in which the border changed from being relatively open (the distinction between approved and unapproved roads notwithstanding) into being a highly securitised, dangerous place is the subject of this superb book by Patrick Mulroe. What Mulroe's meticulous study encapsulates is the way that, even as the border became 'harder' and more secure, so there remained a close connection between experience on either side of it. In this way, the border continued to be more of a 'membrane' than a barricade.

The effort of trying to manage this interconnection was the unenviable and un-sought-after task of the Irish security forces from 1969 onwards. This is a fascinating and timely book on the securitisation of the Irish border during the first decade of the Troubles. It is very well-written, presenting an enormous amount of archival material in a way that is always engaging and never overwhelming. The author's arguments are woven throughout the book, sustained and explained by evidence; I will attempt to elaborate just a few key ones here.

Border as membrane not barricade

First, to pick up on the point above: the border is a point of connection and infiltration between two jurisdictions. It is unsurprising that the predominant ambition for Irish security from the earliest stages of the Troubles was to keep the conflict 'contained' to the six counties (p.55) but this was never an achievable aim. We see this in the way that, as peace and stability in the north unravelled, so the south too became embroiled in related political instability and crises. We also see it in the lives of individuals that were taken away by violence that would have been inconceivable just a short time beforehand.

Close ties and connections across these islands became transformed into routes and means of danger. Some of the most poignant parts of this book are in the sentences noting the deaths in

Belfast of young men from the southern border counties, killed as serving soldiers of the British Army in Northern Ireland. Similarly serving officers of the RUC and UDR living in the southern border counties found themselves in direct danger. Indeed, one of the first signs of the growing danger of the border region was the vivid danger posed to those with any connection to the British security forces as they traversed the border, even if it was a crossing they made as part of their daily, unremarkable routine.

Similarly, a clamp down in Northern Ireland on Irish republicans through Operation Motorman (creating no-go areas in certain urban spaces) spurred the movement of IRA personnel south across the border, which had its own knock-on effects in the south (p.74). In fact, much of what the British security forces did in the north shaped the work and risks for Irish police and security forces, even indirectly. And in direct terms, the Irish security forces found themselves called to witness (if not intervene) as British army bullets and CS gas strayed across the border as 'inadvertent' effects of efforts to restore order in the northern border areas.

In one striking example, Mulroe recalls a two hour gun battle across the Armagh/Louth border at Dungooley in January 1972 in which the British army fired 2500 rounds at the IRA on the southern side. There was a presence from the Gardaí and (belatedly) Irish army on the other side, who observed the whole event, purportedly with the intention of capturing IRA suspects but in the end, despite questioning a few young men leaving the area, no arrests were made by the Gardaí (p.95). Such inaction was the norm. The Gardaí were not seen as actively defending the local southern border communities, even as loyalist violence in the north increased dramatically and occasionally spilled over across the border.

The securitisation of the border

Secondly, this book offers a timely correction to any simplistic impression of how the border became a hard border during the Troubles. Mulroe notes that the early securitisation of the border, at least from the other side, was predicated mainly in official rhetoric. Lynch's August 1969 speech in which he said the Irish government 'can no longer stand by' was, it soon became clear, not a call to (or promise of action) but a substitute for the same. In the meantime, relative peace and normality persisted. There were virtually no shooting incidents in the first years of the Troubles; neither were there arms seizures or displays of public hostility between the Gardaí and IRA (p.22).

By 1973/4, however, violence spread along the border. This was in part a consequence of the targeting of certain groups of people, and in part an effect of the rapid securitisation of society in the north, which had direct consequences across the border. In 1973, a young Donegal man was shot and killed by the RUC at the border in Pettigoe after a car chase; the reason he fled was not for any paramilitary connections but because he had been disqualified from driving (p.145).

Suddenly otherwise insignificant actions or daily choices had fatal consequences – and the integration of life in the border region mean that these spread into the south. By 1975, the Miami Showband massacre epitomised the depravity of violence around the border, with paramilitaries taking on the identities of security forces (and even colluding with them in some cases) to wreak new levels of fear and danger into the border region. By 1976, the IRA classified any 'Free State civil servant' in the 'occupied area' involved in 'prosecuting a case' against a 'republican prisoner of war' as a legitimate target (p.164). The lines between civilians and security forces and paramilitaries on both sides of the border were being deliberately blurred.

The difficulties in British-Irish security cooperation

Domestic political pressure from the south forced high-level constraints on cooperation between security forces on either side of the border. At the start, Mulroe explains, the Gardaí did not know how to deal with republicans; by 1975 they had a fairly clear strategy in place, thanks to greater clarity and determination from the political echelons. However, on the matter of dealing with their British counterparts, they remained far less clear and policy was ill-defined (p.59, 109). Any cooperation, Mulroe claims, was 'restricted, cautious and covert' (p.165). The British found that the degree of cooperation they could expect from the Irish in relation to any one incident was largely determined by the effect that it would have on the southern side of the Irish border (p.158).

And from the perspective of locals in the border region, the Gardaí played an awkward role. Mulroe explains how, as Laurence McKeown's play *Green and Blue* portrays so well, many a Garda felt uncomfortable and unwelcome in the border villages. Their tactics in these early days were based on personnel and 'eyes and ears' policing rather than resources. They patrolled roads, rather than spiked them. And when the British cratered border roads (an act which Minister Des O'Malley blamed squarely for the escalation in violence in the area), Gardaí did not intervene to in public efforts to reopen them, which Mulroe describes as being often accompanied by 'stone throwing' (p.92).

The political constraints on security policy and action

As the security forces became better organised and prepared in the south, so the spontaneity of early political efforts to respond to the crisis became a thing of the past. Mulroe's description of Minister Patrick Hillery's unexpected visit to the Falls Road on 11th July 1970 is wonderful not only because of its apparently unplanned nature (the date is conspicuously risky), but because Mulroe explains it as being part of a conscious effort to outflank the so-called (Neil) Blaney faction (p.33). Indeed, much top-level Irish government policy at the start of the Troubles reflected intra-Fianna Fáil struggles, of which the Arms Trial was but a symptom of a much more profound problem. Mulroe's grasp of the political machinations and game-playing makes his description of the changing security environment all the more engaging and convincing.

In the detail, we see the uniquely difficult position of Irish political leaders, caught between factions of their own party, public opinion, and the need to produce a solid basis for trust and cooperation with the British government. Amid all this, Mulroe argues, the Irish state was operating at this time from a position of weakness, obsessed by internal threat (p.232.). 'The IRA had to be defeated while the nationalist image of the state had to be maintained. There were occasions when these two aims conflicted' and this resulted in poor decision making and planning that no doubt had effects on security and stability in the border region in the 1970s (p6).

Overall, this brilliant but sobering read brings with it most sobering thoughts: how quickly cross-border connections can be damaged by violence and rumours of violence, how rapidly the inconceivable can become routine, how deep runs the legacy of the 'borders of the past'.

ⁱ <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/kenny-and-may-agree-no-return-to-hard-border-after-brex-1.2734884>